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'**Hamas-linked**' relief funds frozen - British Muslims furious over charity commission's decision to ...

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576 words

28 August 2003

The Guardian

15

English

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'**Hamas-linked**' relief funds frozen - British Muslims furious over charity commission's decision to follow US in closing accounts of the UK-based **Interpal**.

British Muslims reacted angrily yesterday after the charity commission froze the accounts of a Palestinian charity over alleged links to **Hamas**.

The action came after President George Bush announced on Friday that the US would block the bank account of the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund, or **Interpal**, which has its headquarters in Britain.

Mr Bush said he was taking the measure because **Hamas** claimed responsibility for last week's suicide attack that killed 20 passengers on a bus in Jerusalem.

At the end of last week, the US and Israel urged Britain to take action against **Interpal**.

Ibrahim Hewitt, the chairman of trustees of **Interpal**, said: "This is happening because America says so, because Israel says so.

"The Israelis want to starve the Palestinians of what little we are able to give them and to make them even more disheartened."

However, the charity commission denied its action was linked to US or Israeli pressure.

A spokeswoman said: "We received concerns at the end of March and opened an initial evaluation in April.

"We have now opened a formal investigation. This action follows concerns received alleging the charity's links to **Hamas's** political or militant activities."

The charity can still transfer funds to Palestine, where money is channelled to schools, hospitals and bereaved families, but must ask permission from the charity commission.

Interpal's accounts were previously frozen in 1996 after Israel accused the charity of helping **Hamas**, but after a two-month inquiry by the charity commission it was cleared of any wrongdoing.

"They were well organised and we found no evidence of any donation that could not be accounted for, or that had been given for political reasons," the commission's 1996 annual report said, adding that its staff appeared to be "motivated by faith and altruism rather than fanaticism".

Interpal operates in Palestine and refugee camps in neighbouring countries through local charities.

Investigators may be concerned because although **Hamas** is best-known in the west for its suicide bomb attacks, it draws support from a religious and charitable network in the Palestinian territories and may have become involved in the distribution of charity money.

Mr Hewitt said: "**Hamas** is an ideology as much as an organisation. We deal with people whether they are **Hamas** or whether they are Fatah.

"Palestinian society is riven by factions but we don't look at that, we look at it on the basis of need."

The Muslim Council of Britain has sent a letter of protest to the foreign secretary, Jack Straw.

Its secretary general, Iqbal Sacranie, said: "What disturbs is that a foreign government, albeit a close ally, should not try to impose its own determination on an independent state.

"It would be most serious if the British government acquiesced to this demand, knowing as we do that this decision is primarily influenced by the Israeli lobby.

"There has been a sinister campaign conducted against this reputable charity for the last few years."

On Friday, the US treasury also froze the accounts of six **Hamas** leaders and four other charities based in France, Switzerland, Austria and Lebanon, which Washington alleged were raising funds for **Hamas**.

It urged European countries to do likewise.

Document GRDN000020030828dz8s0004p

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